Roland SONICCELL

Packing plenty of features plus performance portability is Roland's new SonicCell. **Hollin Jones** hits the road...

KEY FEATURES

- 128-voice sound module with more than 1,100 patches
- Two SRX expansion slots
- USB audio/MIDI interface with phantom power
- Onboard COSM effects
- Software editor and VST/AU plug-in
- Audio file playback
- Sonar LE

SONICCELL

Manufacturer **Roland**

Price **£529**

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People expect a lot from their kit in this day and age, which in turn fuels the innovation and development that spawns further expectation. In most cases, though, additional functionality is key to delivering more bangs for the buck while staying within the limits of what is technologically feasible.

Roland is at the forefront of this push, with many of its new products combining the functionality of several devices in one unit. SonicCell is its latest innovation, and even though its features may not be revolutionary in themselves, the concept and form of the product is more unusual. A combined audio interface, expandable synth and portable backing machine, it's aimed at a wide range of potential users.

Out of the box

The unit itself is lightweight but sturdy and small enough to slip easily into a bag. The rear panel sports MIDI I/O, stereo jack outs, stereo jack inputs (one of which doubles as a phantom-powered XLR), an input level knob and input-select switch. There are two USB ports, one for connection to a computer and one for a memory stick, as well as a Kensington lock port, which will be handy for public areas such as schools and colleges.

ROLAND'S SONICCELL IS A VERY CAPABLE DEVICE THAT PUNCHES WELL ABOVE ITS WEIGHT.

On the front edge of the SonicCell is a sample-rate switch with options for 44.1kHz, 48kHz or 96kHz, a master volume dial and a mini-jack headphone out. These three feel a little flimsy – especially the master volume dial – although they work perfectly well. Half of the face of the SonicCell is taken up by a removable cover, under which you can install two SRX expansion boards. On the other side, a small display gives you visual feedback, and some buttons and a data wheel enable you to operate the unit independently of a computer.

The unit's primary feature is its synthesizer, which has a commendable selection of more than 1,100 preset sounds and a sound engine derived from the Fantom-X. It's 128-voice polyphonic, and when using the synth section you can be in one of two modes. Patch mode enables you to play one part at a time as well as edit sounds and effects. Performance mode, on the other hand, enables you to mix and match up to 16 rhythm and sound parts.

It can be the case that all-in-one devices sacrifice sound quality – or at least the realism of the onboard sounds

SonicCell connects to a Mac or PC via the USB port. There's also a port for a memory stick.

MEASURING UP

Novation's XioSynth (£229) is a synth, audio and MIDI interface, plus a real-time MIDI controller. It has a keyboard and draws its power over USB, as well as having some excellent patches. Its computer integration is somewhat more limited than SonicCell's and it has fewer patches. There's also no provision for reading to or from a USB memory stick. Roland's own SH-201 (£499) is a keyboard geared towards synthesis, but it also has USB audio/MIDI integration and a VSTi editor.

– in the bid to cram in lots of features, but this isn't the case with the SonicCell, which has seven preset banks plus one user bank and a GM soundset. Despite the minimal controls, navigation is simple, and you can quickly jump between banks, instrument types or presets by rotating and pushing the data wheel. The patch screen also offers the facility to view a list of the available sounds in a bank as well as offering access to the editing features.

Helpfully, each patch has a short preset demo that you can play to audition a sound without needing to connect a keyboard to the SonicCell. The straightforward navigation system also extends to tweaking and programming any of the 78 excellent onboard effects.

sounds, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the all-round usability of SonicCell's palette of instruments.

Sonic talents

As well as a synth, SonicCell is also an audio and MIDI interface that connects to your PC or Mac via USB. After installing the driver (which supports Intel Macs and Windows Vista), it appears as an audio and MIDI source and destination in compatible applications. You're supplied with an editor program that makes the fine-tuning and general viewing of patches much easier than using the built-in screen.

It's only when you fire up the editor that you see just how deep the sound editing and effect routing possibilities go – so deep, in fact, that it may put off the less experienced at first. However, if you don't want to get into the fine details you don't have to, and you'll still get a lot out of the synth.

THE COMBINATION OF GOOD SOUNDS, RECORDING ABILITY AND PORTABILITY MAKE SONICCELL AN IDEAL CHOICE.

The sounds on offer really are very good, covering everything from stately grand pianos, swirling organs and lush strings to dusty drum kits, huge electronic basses, pads, stabs and bleeps. There's even a passable selection of guitars and orchestral instruments, although, as ever, these are tough for any synth to get spot on. If your assumption about small portable synths is that they all have clunky GM

The editor is also supplied as a VST and Audio Units plug-in, so with everything connected you can play SonicCell's sounds directly inside DAWs such as Cubase, Logic or Sonar LE (Sonar LE is supplied with SonicCell, but it's Windows-only). Recording dry or with effects is easy to set up, and since the effects are processed by SonicCell, they place no strain on your host system.

Finally, SonicCell is also a playback machine. If you load SMF, AIFF, .WAV or mp3 files onto a memory stick it can play them back and you can use the Playlist editor to build up tracks.

SonicCell can be integrated with a computer via its built-in USB port. The supplied software editor enables you to edit its settings remotely.

Hard sell

SonicCell is a very capable device that punches well above its weight. As an interface it's not revolutionary, but it works well and the computer integration is solid. There's also surprising depth to the editing features, but for most users, the learning curve will be gentle.

Overall, the combination of good sounds, recording ability and its portability make SonicCell an ideal choice for small studios or live rigs. MTM

Thanks to its expandability and portability, SonicCell will no doubt be incorporated into many performing musicians' live rigs. Its playback capabilities should appeal to solo performers or duos.

SUMMARY

WHY BUY

- Very portable
- Excellent sounds
- Comprehensive editing features
- Expandable with SRX boards
- Phantom power
- Good computer integration and software editor
- Can directly access USB memory stick for audio playback

WALK ON BY

- Bundled sequencer is PC-only
- Some controls feel a little basic

VERDICT

SonicCell has no single 'killer' feature, but it's a well-integrated combination of interface, synth and playback machine in a portable and user-friendly package.

★★★★★★★★½☆

METHOD SPOT

The typical recording and performing musician will need a good palette of sounds, a recording interface and a playback machine – and if all of these can be put into a single portable box, so much the better. That's what Roland has done with SonicCell, which also presents you with the option to install up to two of the company's excellent SRX sound expansion boards, tailored specifically around the kind of sounds you need. You'd normally be able to do this only with higher-end Roland products, so having access to these sounds in SonicCell is a tremendous bonus.